

No. 3--The Swing of the Pendulum

There was now little doubt that Mme. Koluchy knew herself to be in personal danger. On the Derby day she had thrown down the gauntlet with a vengeance—her object heretofore would be to put me out of the way. I lived in an atmosphere of intangible mystery, which was all the darker and more horrible because it was felt, not seen.

By Dufreyer's advice, I left the bringing of this dangerous woman to justice in his hands. He employed the cleverest and most up-to-date detectives to have her secretly watched, and from time to time they brought us their reports. Clue after clue arose; each clue was carefully followed, but it invariably led to disappointing results. Madame eluded every effort to bring a definite charge against her. The money we were spending, however, was not entirely in vain. We learned that her influence and the wide range of her acquaintances were far beyond what we had originally surmised. Her fame as a healer, her marvelous and occult cures, the reputation of her great wealth and dazzling beauty increased daily, and I was glad to see that long I should meet her in the lists. The encounter was destined to come sooner than I had anticipated, and in a manner most unexpected.

It was the beginning of the following November that I received an invitation to dine with an old friend, Harry de Brett. He was several years my senior, and had recently succeeded to his father's business in the city—an old-established firm of bankers, whose house was in St. Mark's court, Grace Church street. Only a few days previously it had been announced in the society papers that a marriage had been arranged between De Brett's only daughter, Geraldine, and the Duke of Friedeck, a foreign nobleman, whose name I had seen figuring prominently at many a function the previous season. I had known Geraldine since she was a child, and was glad to have an opportunity of offering my congratulations.

At the appointed hour, I found myself at De Brett's beautiful house in Haymarket, and Geraldine, who was standing near her father, came eagerly forward to welcome me. She was a pretty and very young girl, with a clear, olive complexion, and soft, dark eyes, she had the innocent and naive manner of a school girl. She was delighted to see me, and began to talk eagerly.

"Come and stand by this window, Mr. Head. I am so glad you were able to come."

"I want to introduce you to Karl—the Duke of Friedeck, I mean; he will be here in a minute or two." As she spoke she dropped her voice into a semi-whisper.

"You know, of course, that we are to be married soon?" she continued. "I have heard of the engagement," I answered, and congratulated her heartily. I should like much to meet the duke. His name is, of course, familiar to anyone who reads the society papers."

"He is anxious to make your acquaintance also," she replied. "I told him you were coming, and he said—"

"But surely the Duke of Friedeck has never heard of me before?" I answered, in some surprise. "He thinks he has," she replied. "He was quite excited when I spoke of you. I asked him if he had met you; he said, 'No, but that you were very well known in scientific circles as a clever man. The duke is a great scientist himself, Mr. Head, and I know he would like to have a chat with you. I am certain you will be friends.'"

Just at that moment the duke was announced. He was a tall and handsome man of about five and thirty, with the somewhat florid complexion, blue eyes, and fair, curling hair of the Teuton. He was well dressed, and had the indubitable air of good breeding which proclaims the gentleman. He looked at him with much curiosity, being puzzled by an intangible memory of having seen his face before—where and how I could not tell.

Geraldine slipped up to him and brought him to my side.

"Karl," she cried, "this is my friend, Mr. Head. Don't you remember we talked about him this morning?"

"The duke has heard of me," I said. "I am glad to make your acquaintance," he said to me. "Yours is a name of distinction in the world of science."

"That can scarcely be the case," I answered. "It is true I am fond of original research, but up to the present I have worked for my own pleasure alone."

"Nevertheless, the world has whispered of you," he replied. "I too am fond of science, and have lost myself more than once in its tortuous mazes. I have lately started a laboratory of my own, but just now other matters—" He broke off abruptly, and glanced at Geraldine, who smiled and blushed.

Dinner was announced. I happened to sit not far from the duke, and noticed that he was a good conversationalist. There was a subject mentioned on which he had passed something to say; and on more than one occasion his repartee was brilliant and his remarks touched with humor. Geraldine, in her white dress, with her soft, rather sad, eyes, her manner at once bright, sweet and timid, made a contrast to this astute-looking man of the world.

I glanced from one to the other, and an uneasiness which I could scarcely account for sprang up within me. Notwithstanding his handsome appearance and his easy and courteous manner, I wondered if this man, nearly double her age, was likely to make the pretty English girl happy.

As dinner progressed I observed that the duke often took the trouble to look at me. I also noticed that whenever our eyes met he turned away. How was it possible for him to have heard of me before? Although I was a scientist, my researches were unknown to the world. I determined to take the first opportunity of solving this mystery.

Soon after 11 o'clock the guests took their leave, and I was just about to follow their example when De Brett asked me to have a pipe with him in his smoking room. As we seated ourselves by the fire, he began to talk at once of his future son-in-law.

"He is a capital fellow, is he not, Head?" exclaimed my host. "I hope you have formed a favorable opinion of him?"

"I never form an opinion quickly," I answered, with caution. "The Duke of Friedeck is certainly distinguished in appearance and—"

The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings

is absolutely genuine. Soon after the great Duke of Marlborough's war and almost immediately after the Battle of Blenheim, the Austrian government took possession of the Dukedom of Friedeck, and until lately the family have remained in exile. It was only a year ago that the present duke regained his rights and all the great estates. He was introduced to us by no less a person than Mme. Koluchy—ah, I see you start. You have heard of her, of course?"

"Who has not?" I replied. "I have met her?" "I said, 'It was with an effort I could command the unsavory thought which seized me at the mere mention of this woman's name.'"

"She dines with us next week," continued De Brett. "a wonderful woman, wonderful! Her cures are marvelous; but that is after all the least part of her interesting personality. She is so fascinating, so wise and good-natured, that men and women alike fall at her feet. As to Geraldine, she has taken a great fancy to her."

"Where did you first meet her?" I asked.

"In Scotland last summer. She was staying with my old friends, the Campbells, a couple of nights, and Friedeck was also one of the guests. It is a friend of yours, Head—and I rather expect so from your manner—will you dine with us again next Thursday in order to meet her? We are going to have a party, and we are in Essex, and Madame is to stay with us for a couple of nights. We expect quite a large party, and can give you a bit—will you come?"

"I wish I could, but I fear it will be impossible for a loan from me. I know Mme. Koluchy, but—I broke off. 'Don't ask me any more at the moment,' De Brett. The fact is your news has excited me, you will say ungraciously."

De Brett gazed at me with earnestness.

"You have fallen under the spell of the most beautiful woman in London," he said. "Is that so, Head?"

"You may put that away if you like," I said after a somewhat prolonged pause. "but I cannot explain myself tonight. Be assured, however, of my deep interest in this matter. I shall know anything more you happen to know with regard to the Duke of Friedeck."

"You certainly are a strange fellow," said my host. "You are wearing at the present moment an air of quite painful mystery. However, here goes. You wish to hear about the duke—He is a rich man, and dabbles now and then on the stock exchange, but not to any serious extension. A week ago he arranged for a loan from me, depositing as security some of the most splendid diamonds I have ever seen. They are worth a king's ransom, and each stone is historical. He brought the diamonds away from the estates in Bavaria, and they are to be resold and presented to Geraldine just before the wedding."

"How large was the amount of the loan?" I asked.

De Brett raised his eyebrows. He evidently thought that I was infringing on the privilege even of an old friend. "Compared with the security the loan was a trifling one," he said, after a pause. "Not more than £20,000. Friedeck will pay me back next week in order to have them ready to present to Geraldine on her wedding day."

"And when do you propose that the wedding shall take place?" I continued.

"Ah, you have me there, Head; that is the painful part. You know what my motherless girl is to me—well, the duke insists upon taking her away between now and Christmas. They are to spend Christmas in the old feudal castle, in the old castle in Bavaria. It is a great wedding party from the little one, but she will be happy. I never met a man I took more warmly to than Karl, Duke of Friedeck. You can see for yourself that the child is devoted to him."

"I can," I said. "I will wish you good night now, De Brett. Be assured once again of my warm interest in all that concerns you and Geraldine."

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"De Brett looked at me through his gold-rimmed spectacles with a blank expression of amazement. 'If it were any other man who spoke to me in this strain,' he said at last. 'I should show him the door. Are you aware, Head, that this is a most serious allegation? You must give me your reasons for what you say.'"

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"Mr. Head, I have disturbed me considerably, but I will do so. I should be sorry to alarm Geraldine unnecessarily. I am quite certain you are mistaken. You never saw the duke until you met him at my house, did you?"

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After grave thought I resolved, if I discovered nothing fresh with regard to Friedeck to acquaint De Brett with what I knew of Mme. Koluchy. If Geraldine married the duke, she should at least do so with her father's eyes opened. I little guessed, however, when I made these plans, what circumstances were to bring forth.

On the following Thursday morning I awoke from a disturbed sleep, to find London enveloped in one of the thickest fogs that had been known for some years. The limit of my vision scarcely extended beyond the area of railings round which the soot-laden mist clung in a breathless calm.

In the course of the morning I received a telegram from De Brett.

"Mr. Head, at the bank not later than a quarter past 4 were the few words which it contained."

Soon after 2 o'clock I started for my destination, avoiding omnibuses and preferring to walk the greater part of the way. I arrived at St. Mark's Court at the time named, and was just about to knock at the door when two men in frock coats and top hats, who had been knocking against me entered the eating house.

I returned now to the bank. As soon as I arrived the manager came up to me.

"Mr. De Brett was called out about half an hour ago," he said, "but he has asked you to wait for him here, Mr. Head. He expects to be back not later than half-past 4."

I waited accordingly, a clerk brought me the Times, and I drew up my chair in front of a bright fire. Now and then someone made a desultory remark about the fog, which was thickening in intensity each moment. At last, however, the bank had, of course, closed at 4 o'clock; but the clerks were busy finishing accounts and putting the place in order for the night. The different tills were emptied, the keys of the great vault where the different safes were kept, were handed over to the manager. The hands of the clock over the mantelpiece pointed to a quarter to 5, when the sound of wheels was heard distinctly outside, and the next moment I saw a splendid equipage, brought in and pair draw up outside the bank. A footman dismounted and handed the commissioner a note. This was brought into the office. It was for me; a clerk gave it to me. I glanced at it, and saw that the letter was from De Brett. I tore open the envelope and read as follows: "Dear Head—"

"I have been unexpectedly detained at Lynn's bank in Broad street, so have sent the brougham for you. Will you come home now, and pick me up at Lynn's? Please ask Derbyshire, the manager, for the keys of the small safe. He will give them to you after he has locked up the strong room. Yours, Harry De Brett."

I turned to the manager. He was an elderly man, with grizzled hair and an anxious expression of face.

"Mr. De Brett wants me to bring him the keys of the small safe," I said. "I saw the man raise his brows in surprise when he heard of it."

"That is an unusual request," he answered; "but, of course, it must be as Mr. De Brett wishes. As a rule, either Mr. Frome or I keep the keys, as Mr. De Brett never cares to be troubled with them."

"Here is his letter," I replied, handing it to the manager. He read it, retaining it in his hand.

"Do you object to my keeping this, Mr. Head?" The request is so unusual, that I should like to have this note as my authority."

"Certainly," I replied.

"Very well, sir. I shall have to detain you for a few moments, as we have not quite cleared the tills. The keys of all the other safes are kept in the small one. I will bring you the keys of the small safe in a moment or two."

The clerks bustled about the work of the night was quickly accomplished, and shortly after 5 o'clock I was seated in De Brett's luxurious brougham, with the keys of the small safe in my pocket.

We went along very slowly, as the fog seemed to grow thicker each moment. Suddenly the coachman plighted his way in the direction of Broad street. I began to feel a peculiar sensation. My head was giddy, an unusual weakness trembled through my nerves, and for the first time I noticed that the brougham was full of a faint, sweet odor. Doubtless the smell of the fog had prevented my observing this at first. The sensation of faintness grew worse, and I now made an effort to attract the coachman's attention. This I altogether failed to do, and, becoming seriously alarmed, I tried to open the door, but it resisted all my efforts, also did the windows, which were securely fastened. The horrible feeling that I was the victim of some dastardly plot came over me with force. I shouted and struggled to attract attention, and finally tried to break the windows. All in vain—the sense of giddiness grew worse, everything seemed to revolve before my mental vision—the bank, De Brett, the keys of the safe which I had in my pocket, the thought of Geraldine and her danger, were mixed up in a confused mass. The next moment I had lost consciousness.

When I came to myself I found that I was lying on a piece of waste ground in the neighborhood of Putney. For one or two moments I could not in the least recall what had happened. Then my memory came back with a quick dash.

"The Duke of Friedeck! The bank! Geraldine!" I said to myself. I sprang to my feet and began a hasty examination of my pockets. Yes, my worst conjectures were confirmed; for the keys of the small safe were gone!

My watch and money were intact; the keys alone were stolen. I stood still for a moment considering, when the need of immediate action came over me, and I made my way at once to the nearest railway station. I found, to my relief, that it was only a little past 11 o'clock. Beyond doubt, I had recovered my consciousness sooner than the villains who had planned this terrible plot intended.

I took the next train to town and, on my way, resolved on my line of action. To warn De Brett was impracticable, for the simple reason that he was out of town—to waste time visiting Dufreyer was also not to be thought of. Without the least doubt, the bank was in imminent danger, and I must not lose an unnecessary moment in getting to St. Mark's court.

As I thought over matters I felt more and more certain that the eating house facing the bank was a rendezvous for Madame's agents, a hastily resolved, therefore, to disguise myself and go there. Once I had belonged to the infamous Brotherhood, I knew their pass word. By this means, if my suspicions were true, I could doubtless gain admission—as for the rest, I must leave it to chance.

As soon as I reached town I drove off at once to a theatrical agent, whose acquaintance I had already made. He remembered me, and I explained enough of the situation to induce him to render me assistance. In a very short time I was metamorphosed. By a few lines I secured twelve yards of dark hair completely covered my own, my complexion was dyed to a dark olive, and in a thick traveling cloak, with a high collar, I scarcely knew myself. My final act was to slip a loaded revolver into my pocket, and then, feeling that I was prepared for the worst, I hurried forth.

It was now between 12 and 1 in the morning, and the fog was denser than ever. Few know London better than I do, but once or twice in that perilous journey I lost my way. At last, however, I found myself in St. Mark's court. I was now breathing the wicked evil; the fog was piercing my lungs and hurting my throat, my eyes watered. When I got into the court I heard the steady tramp of the policeman whose duty it was to guard the place at night. Taking no notice of him, I went across the court in the direction of the eating house. The light within still burned, but dimly. There was a blur visible, nothing more. This I thought one of the windows of the door was shut. I tapped at the door.

A man came immediately and opened it. He asked me what my business was. I repeated the password of the Brotherhood, and he opened the door. My conjectures were verified—I was instantly admitted.

"Are you expecting to see a friend here tonight?" said the man. "It is rather late, and we are just closing."

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